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Vernacular Faces

APPRECIATIONS

It is just an illusion, of course, but it seems to me that the very faces in Mike Disfarmer's photographs — now on exhibit at two Manhattan galleries — have gone out of fashion as surely as the hairdos and print dresses and pressed overalls his subjects are wearing. For nearly 50 years, Disfarmer, who died in 1959 and whose real name was Meyer, took studio portraits of the people in and around Heber Springs, Ark., a small town north of Little Rock. But these are not ordinary photographs. It is as if the farmers and housewives and soldiers heading off to World War II in these prints found themselves in the studio of a 19th-century daguerreotypist. They are framed with a quiet, stern formality that captures a passionate individuality in each of them as well as their response to the camera, and to the strange man standing behind it.

The faces are burned and worn. The arms hang long and heavy. Some of Disfarmer's subjects have been caught off guard, as if they had never seen themselves in a mirror before, much less in a photograph. Others know the poses and the gestures that a camera is supposed to elicit. But given the setting, a shallow footing against a blank backdrop bathed in northern light, it is astonishing how fully these people reveal themselves. They have chosen their own parts, and they play them superbly — the three Verser brothers all in uniform, the nine daughters of Mary Bullard, Earl and Violet arm in arm.

Each of these photographs strikes me as the midpoint in a story we do not know — stories, perhaps, that we do not even know how to tell any more. You can see in these prints the surprising grace of a clumsy man, the unexpected beauty of a plain woman. You can feel the labor almost everyone here has known. What I wonder is this: If you could somehow put the people of Heber Springs, circa 1940, into modern costume and modern hairdos, would they look like us? And if you put us in the clothing of that time and did those extraordinary things to our hair, would we look like them? Or would we look — so unworn, so at ease — as if we were only pretending?

VERLYN KLINKENBORG